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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:

2018

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Luehrmann, S., & Weir, T. H. (2018, Nov 16). Bolshevism as Secular Religion? A Discussion of The House of Government . The Immanent Frame.

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Bolshevism as secular religion? A discussion of *The House of Government*

 tif.ssrc.org/2018/11/16/bolshevism-as-secular-religion

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November 16, 2018



The House of Government is one of the most important recent studies of the Russian Revolution and the early Soviet Union. It traces the rise and fall of the first generation of Bolshevik leaders and offers a new answer to one of the key questions that continues to occupy historians, namely whether Stalinism was a necessary outcome of the Russian Revolution, or, to put it more pointedly, whether the purges of the 1930s that eliminated a significant portion of the Old Bolsheviks resulted from the very logic of their ideology. Slezkine answers this question in the affirmative, essentially equating ideology to faith and locating Bolshevism within a transhistorical continuum of millenarian sects.



Since its publication in 2017, *The House of Government* has been the subject of numerous reviews by historians of the Soviet Union who have praised the masterful bridging of domestic and political history while questioning the focus on elites. However, it has not received sustained attention from

scholars of religion, which is surprising given that Yuri Slezkine reads Bolshevik deeds and misdeeds as functional expressions of millenarianism. In order to expand the discussion of Slezkine's study, we asked scholars of religion familiar with the Soviet and other communist regimes to join us in this book forum. The author has responded to the commentaries in an interview.

This is a startling book in many ways, but let us start with three. First, Slezkine conveys in magnificent detail and with great empathy the lives of some thirty or so residents of an apartment complex—the “house of government”—erected in Moscow for the leading Bolshevik cadres. His delicate reading of life narratives and his ability to weave them together gives us a view of the subjectivities of early Soviet elites that is difficult to match in depth and sophistication. Second, this subtle treatment of individual lives stands in stark contrast to the book's bold thesis that Bolshevism was destined to follow the life cycle of all millenarian sects. Slezkine delivers this thesis forcefully, but laced with irony that borders at times on self-caricature. Third, he largely disregards the scholarly convention of entering into an open debate with the secondary literature. Because the author has chosen not to draw out the implications of his analysis for ongoing conversations about religion and modern politics, the contributors to our forum have done some of this work for him.

The forum essays to come show that Slezkine's ideas spark admiration as well as resistance. As Victoria Smolkin notes, the sheer volume of materials presented by Slezkine—letters and journals as well as published speeches, memoirs, and works of fiction—leaves it hard to doubt one of his central claims: that many of the revolutionaries who built the Soviet state were animated by a fervent expectation of a radically new world, not unlike the expectations of revivalist movements. Slezkine presents us with a picture of an enchanted modernity that may irritate those who would posit sharper distinctions between secularist and religious paths to modernization—for example, between the modernizing paths of Nasser's Egypt and Nehru's India on the one hand, and Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran on the other. In Katya Tolstaya's analysis, Slezkine casts his net wide by employing a Durkheimian definition of religion (one that emphasizes religion's social function), rather than by examining the theological and secularist traditions that were part of the Bolsheviks' world.

A key point of criticism that emerges in the forum concerns Slezkine's comparative method. Although it is commonplace in comparative history to also address entanglements, Slezkine appears to have chosen comparative cases so remote from the history of Bolshevism as to foreclose any investigations of mutual influence. Had he compared the Bolsheviks to other adherents of Marxism, such as the German socialists, he might have established whether Bolshevik millenarianism sprung from their secular philosophy or from a specifically Russian religious context. If he had compared Bolshevism to other religious faiths indigenous to the Russian empire, whether Catholic, Eastern Orthodox Christian, or Jewish, he might have better elucidated the possible impact of religious socialization on the leading revolutionaries. Had he compared Bolshevism to other forms of secularism popular among Russian intellectuals, say the naturalistic monism of Ludwig Büchner and Ernst Haeckel or the empirio-monism of Ernst Mach, he might have found that this was an important source of Bolshevik faith in immanence. An examination of the competition and mutual influence between socialist and Orthodox movements for workers' reform in the decades preceding the revolution might have

lessened the risk of exoticizing and Orientalizing Russia as being less modern by virtue of being Orthodox. As Heather Coleman puts it in her essay, much theorizing about religion and modernity is shaped “not just by Christian assumptions but by western Christian ones,” and Slezkine’s comparative choices seem to deepen that trend.

Slezkine takes the reader on a transhistorical romp with stops at Mormon Utah, the Taiping rebellion, and the congregations of Apostle Paul. In Mayfair Yang’s reading, inter-imperial comparisons with China open up fruitful questions about millenarianism as an outgrowth of specifically modern anxieties about change and perceived backwardness. But Slezkine eschews such situated comparisons, which would necessarily also lead to conclusions about the proximate historical causes of revolution. Instead he grounds his analysis in a universalizing view of millenarianism as an ideal type. Readers of Slezkine’s previous book, *The Jewish Century*, will be familiar with this method. That book opens with a chapter discussing Jews as “mercurians,” in reference to Ruth Benedict’s ideal types, and then examines the modulations of this sociological starting position in the history of Soviet Jews.

One of the literatures Slezkine alludes to without in-depth analysis is that on “political religion.” This theory, as articulated most completely by Eric Voegelin starting in the 1930s, holds that totalitarian regimes were effectively secularized forms of religion. This view was further popularized in the 1950s by liberal American critics of communism, and resuscitated after the end of the Cold War by such historians as Hans Meier and Emilio Gentile. As Arpad von Klimó rightly points out in his essay, this theory has failed to gain much traction and has slipped out of fashion over the past ten years. Von Klimó suggests that Slezkine’s work does not overcome the methodological flaws of this theory, the most significant being that it operates by analogy. Neither does Slezkine explicitly examine the Cold War uses of this theory, which cast both “religion” and “communism” as irrational alternatives to liberal democracy and post-Fordist capitalism. Though not engaging these debates directly, *The House of Government* suggests a different approach to “political religion” by shifting from inevitably value-charged comparisons into the mode of ironic narrative.

Specifically, Slezkine departs from those theorists of political religion, like Voegelin and Waldemar Gurian, who, as conservative religious activists, saw in Christianity (generally Catholicism) a healthy way of constructing the relationship between theology and public life and in totalitarianism a heresy. Slezkine rejects any normative definition of religion, which might make Bolshevism a derivative or atypical expression of a religious norm. Instead, he uses millenarianism as an anthropological category, which he applies to transcendent and immanent faiths alike. He does so as a decidedly secular observer, who casts scorn on all millenarian expectations, whether Christian or Marxist.

In the preface, Slezkine proposes to work in three registers: family saga, analysis, and literature. The tension between analysis and literature gives the book its vibrancy. *Analysis* reproduces the life cycle of millenarian fervor, comparable to what anthropologist Mathijs Pelkmans calls the “pulsation” of ideology and religious studies scholar Ann Taves calls “emergence.” We follow the cohort of revolutionaries through youthful malaise and daydreaming, the insurgency in 1917, following which they had the sudden responsibility to put their predictions into practice, and, finally, the violent disillusionment in the purges. As a

postscript, we see survivors' attempts to continue life after catastrophe, and maintain a relationship with a state whose structures have come of age. The routinization that is a classic end point of revivalist movements comes, in its Soviet rendering, at the price of selective forgetting.

Literature, by contrast, speaks to the role of fictional narratives in the Bolshevik experience. Slezkine spends little time on the conventional explanations of revolutionary commitment, such as frustrated nationalism or social marginalization. Instead he lavishes many pages on the novels Bolsheviks read. He quotes a statement made by the future head of the Soviet government Yakov Sverdlov during his Siberian exile: "I put books to the test of life and life to the test of books." At times, faith and literature flowed together, at other times literature resisted the faith. *The House of Government* concludes with the claim that socialism faltered because the governing elite of the first workers' and peasants' state allowed their children to read Tolstoy and imbibe his humanism rather than inculcating them with revolutionary principles. In the end, then, millenarianism appears as a drama, a story begging to be performed in history. One of the chief qualities of the Bolshevik drama was that it failed to reproduce itself beyond the first generation and was relatively easily forgotten.

Literature also informs the way that Slezkine writes. To distance himself from the Bolshevik faith, he reaches into the repertoire of novelists and borrows techniques that most scholars would avoid: irony, parody, hyperbole. His book walks self-consciously between history, fable, and literature, an intention he declares in a tongue-in-cheek disclaimer: "This work is a work of history. Any resemblance to fictional characters, dead or alive, is entirely coincidental." One moral of this book for scholars of religion and secularism is that one had best approach the sacred qualities of modern politics with creativity, caution, and a dose of irony.